



TITLE:

<Book Review>Abidin Kusno. The Appearance of Memory: Mnemonic Practices of Architecture and Urban Form in Indonesia. Duke University Press, 2010, 332p.

AUTHOR(S):

SURYOMENGGOLO, Jafar

CITATION:

SURYOMENGGOLO, Jafar. <Book Review>Abidin Kusno. The Appearance of Memory: Mnemonic Practices of Architecture and Urban Form in Indonesia. Duke University Press, 2010, 332p.. 東南アジア研究 2010, 48(2): 215-219

ISSUE DATE:

2010-09-30

URL:

<http://hdl.handle.net/2433/141769>

RIGHT:

printed texts and the necessity of attending to other dimensions such as urban form in historical and contemporary studies.

The significance of the urban form as a unit of analysis is that, as Kusno skillfully demonstrates in the first section of the book (Chapter 1, 2, 3), it flattens all social actors, “(t)he state, the city government, professionals, religious elites, ethnic groups, nationalists, and neo-liberal” (p. 9), placing these agents in the same terrain so as to enable readers to discern how each pursues his or her own dreams and interests, and seeks to shape urban space in accordance with these dreams and interests. In Chapter 1, Kusno introduces the concept of “the looseness at the center” to describe a neoliberal democratic Indonesia whose city government in Jakarta is losing authority over society; the chapter highlights the mushrooming of the street vendors and their resistances in the usage of urban spaces. Chapter 2 looks at the city government’s attempts to reclaim authority through the “busway project” in order to discipline the masses and regain legitimacy by pursuing typical middle-class agendas. The middle-class taste for architecture, described in Chapter 3, is exemplified by the preference for multifunctional “superblocks” that encourage market consumption, even as talented architects have sought, in the so-called “architecture of the kampung,” an alternative concept in middle-class housing in Jakarta. Kusno’s portrait of the city is a nuanced account of recognition, denial and contradiction, rather than a simple narrative of domination of one group over the others. In this, the book departs from previous studies of the urban form in Southeast Asia that emphasize the marginalization of the weak [for example, Goh 2002], or the celebration of the future [King 2008], or the worship of the capital [Bishop *et al.* 2004], even as it places Jakarta in a comparative map of the postcolonial/developing/urban Asian city.

Abidin Kusno. *The Appearance of Memory: Mnemonic Practices of Architecture and Urban Form in Indonesia*. Duke University Press, 2010, 332p.

With *The Appearance of Memory*, Kusno brings the notion of “physical space and spatial images” (p. 4) into the discussion of the twin subjects of nation and modernity that have dominated literary studies and criticism. Fluent in the key vocabularies of postcolonial studies (e. g. “negotiation,” “contestation,” “register/ registering”), Kusno draws on architecture in Jakarta to make a case for “how building and urban space engage in defining (as well as contesting) the sense of fragmentation, collective memories, new forms of governmentality and different hopes for the future” (p. 20). This is an important contribution to scholarship, a timely reminder of the limitations of focusing exclusively on written or

Kusno asserts that “architecture and urban space as concrete social artifacts” (p.14) are grounded in “the everyday built environment” (p.104) that lends itself to “a *longue durée* analysis... [so that] we see the appearance of various forms of the past that still produce more or less visible manifestation as they pass through different social formations and power relations” (p.19). This could be an interesting and important “method” for investigating the question of “national identity” that has haunted the nation-modernity discussion. But strangely, Kusno’s analysis does not offer a strong validation of this argument.

Take for example Chapter 4, in which he discusses Glodok as “a key Chinese business district” (p.10) without presenting any data on its specific activities and volume of business. Since the 1990s, the functions of Glodok as a business district have become territorially dispersed with the rise of “new” (Chinese-run) business districts in and around Jakarta. Richard Robison [1986] has demonstrated that economic growth under Suharto in the 1980s had created a condition in which Chinese capital accumulation had achieved a large enough scale to become mobile and transnational [on the 1990s, see Winters 1996]. East Asian regional economic integration of the 1990s would enhance this mobility. Moreover, the small and medium-sized businesses (e.g. retailers, importers, manufacturing firms) had aggregated supply and demand for domestic market consumption on a scale that led to the development of the Mangga Dua, and Sunter—Kelapa Gading areas as business districts in their own right. In other words, even before the 1998 riots, there was already a visible trend toward the expansion of the Chinese business, expansion that enabled many of these businesses to move out of Glodok in both domestic and international terms. And even if the destruction and violence of May 1998 riots had been concentrated in the

Glodok area (a claim disputed by other reports), the victims were not limited to ethnic Chinese and shop-owners. From a political point of view, the irony of the riots is that they not only victimized non-Chinese and common people who were not shop-owners; they imagined Glodok as “center” of Chinese business when that was clearly no longer the case. In addition, Ariel Heryanto [1998] has argued that the sexual violence in 1998 cannot be perceived mainly as racial violence against the Chinese but should first be considered as an act of violence against women. By making Glodok synonymous with business activity and with the ethnic Chinese, Kusno’s analysis risks essentializing the Chinese while overlooking important changes in the urban form of Chinese business already underway even before the riots.

Another example is the analysis in Chapter 8, in which Kusno makes the case for a “Global Islam” and the architecture of mosques, but evidently neglects the histories of the strong influence of other foreign elements (besides Arab merchants and Chinese carpenters) and of regional commerce in early maritime Asia on the “visual environment” of the Demak Mosque.¹⁾ The term “Global Islam” might have a certain catchiness in the present, but its use downplays the specific history of the spread of Islam into Southeast Asia in the past, when the key agents were not merely Arabs and the spread was enabled largely by maritime trade that shaped the institutions and spatial arrangements in Southeast Asia, rather than state-sponsored and non-official educational programs as we have witnessed in present times.²⁾ Thus, although Kusno

1) On the “visual environment” of the Demak Mosque and Kudus Minaret through the lens of the attached tiles, see Sakai [2009].

2) See for example Milner [1983] on the concept of “Perfect Man”: “The good ruler ↗

claims to apply “longue dur e analysis” to his discussion in Chapter 8, readers might be disappointed to find only a “thin description” of the process of religious continuity and change, if not a mere juxtaposition of the two notions of “the past” and “the present.”

In addition to that, Kusno’s treatment of “physical space and spatial images” is rather arbitrary and sometimes conflicting. On the analysis of “architecture of the kampung,” Kusno contends that the housing style is designed for the urban middle class, but also notes that Adi “Mamo” Purnomo, the architect in subject, did participate in a “design competition for low-class housing...for the urban poor located under a freeway and along the riverside” (p. 78). In fact, in the Introduction (“Dari Jendela Praktek: Catatan Pembuka”) to his book *Relativitas*, Mamo pokes fun at the architectural style and lifestyle of his contemporaries, the “major label” architects whose offices are (or who aspire to have offices) in numerous skyscrapers in urban Jakarta, by publishing a photograph showing the view from the window of his studio and noting that “what can be seen are none other than neighbors’ roofs that are jumbled together and pretty shabby. In the distance are lined high-class apartment buildings” [2005: 10]. Pigeonholing Mamo as an architect of the middle-class might underplay the fact that Mamo, with his double-vision of the middle-class and urban poor, has taken up some of the contemporary challenges of reconstructing urban space, as has been attempted in many postcolonial urban cities in Asia and Latin America. In fact, Mamo articulates the

“universal wisdom” that housing design in the developing countries cannot be understood apart from the nature of the state and the power of capital to select some memories while erasing others.³⁾

A comparative perspective cognizant of similar efforts at urban reconfiguration in other cities might have enriched Kusno’s interpretation of the busway project in Jakarta. Kusno states that “(t)he busway shelters are an exact replica of those in Bogota (from where Sutiyoso got the idea), but the form seems to fit well with the surrounding city-scape of Jakarta” (p. 62). This natural “fit,” however, belies the complexity of the issue. Readers might get the impression that “the physical space and spatial images” envisioned and realized by the busway project are a perfect expression of *Indonesian* governmentality, but the busway concept’s foreign origins in other postcolonial urban cities in Asia and Latin America suggest as well the existence of *global* prescriptions for the problem of urban congestion. A more rigorous comparison of busway projects in different postcolonial cities might have led to a more nuanced understanding of the “urban pedagogy” of the busway project, which is not merely concerned with regulating and disciplining the movements and behavior of the urban poor, but encodes “metropolitan dreams” of modernizing the city (and population) of Jakarta to place it on a par with other urban cities of the world. Filipina critic Neferti Tadiar’s

↙ was always concerned with ‘modernity’ and it is significant that in adopting Islam the archipelago rulers were taking their polities into that Muslim galaxy which must have seemed to encompass the greater part of the civilized world” [1983: 45].

3) See for example Iraz bal, especially chapter 6: “Gated communities and edge cities as the localizing of global urban design traditions are thus new forms of space production involving very large, often multinational private project ventures in very dynamic real estate markets. Similarly, they represent new form of space consumption for the aforementioned elite” [2005: 214].

study [2004] on Manila's "flyovers," for example, reveals the extent to which the "desire" to control the flows of human and vehicular traffic was conceptualized and expressed through the metaphor of the body.⁴⁾

Lastly, in the analysis of Glodok, Kusno claims to differ from "scholars in cultural studies" (p. 103) by focusing on "objects that were not built for a commemorative purposes but which are equally significant in registering, as well as forgetting, memories of past events" (p. 104). However, his analysis in fact focuses on three "landmarks" of the area, Glodok Plaza, Pasar Glodok, and the Chandra Naya building, with little discussion of the surrounding area that actually determines the dynamics of "physical and spatial images" in Glodok.

This review is not meant to nitpick, but to stimulate further research by drawing on *The Appearance of Memory*'s cogent proposal to treat "architecture and urban space as concrete social artifacts." Kusno's pioneering efforts amply demonstrate that a fresh understanding can be promoted, but not in a way that would sacrifice the concrete particulars of history and the present.

A note on the Indonesian translation. Along

with chapter 4 of Kusno's first book *Behind the Postcolonial*, four chapters of *Appearance of Memory* (chapters 1, 2, 3, 4) were translated into Indonesian and published under the title *Ruang Publik, Identitas dan Memori Kolektif: Jakarta Pasca-Suharto* (Yogyakarta: Ombak, 2009).

Kusno provides a different introduction for the Indonesian readers by posing the issue of the intricate relationship between the representation of public space (*ruang publik*) and collective memory (*memori kolektif*). Less riddled by academic jargon, the introduction poses little "theoretical" questions that make the whole discussion much easier to follow and absorb. By establishing a local context for its importance, the introduction tries to engage in conversation with concerned Indonesian readers in their mutual search to give meaning to the changes that have been happening in their cities (and also, what have been missing from them) over the last ten years since Reformasi (*pascareformasi*). In that way, it offers fresh insights for interrogating the way Jakarta, the focus of the book, has been dreamed of, memorialized, represented and, in actual fact, constructed. However, the translation is poorly done, with some inaccuracies that lead to alterations in meaning.⁵⁾ "Lost in translation," the book

4) Tadiar writes in her chapter, "Metropolitan Dreams": "On the occasion of Manila's 422nd anniversary, Mayor Lim promises his constituency, 'We shall clear up the streets and unclogs the thoroughfares to allow the city to breathe again —and let the lifeblood of its commerce flow freely once more to give life to our city'. What Lim articulates, for which he has become immensely popular among the middle and upper classes, is a desire for what Sigfried Giedion views as 'the fundamental law of parkway — that there must be unobstructed freedom of movement, a flow of traffic maintained evenly at all points without interruption or interference'" [2004: 89].

5) For examples: "Toward the middle of the 1990s" (p. 28) is translated as "Pada awal 1990-an" (p. 100), which is more accurately as "Sampai pertengahan tahun 1990-an"; "an enclosure and a space of retreat" (p. 86) is loosely translated as "pamer kemewahan dan berburu ketenangan" (p. 176); "the narrative construction constitutes a temporal response" (p. 104) is arbitrary translated as "sebuah konstruksi temporal" (p. 72). Some words/sentence are also omitted in the translation: one important sentence (p. 87, line 2-8) which compares the past and the present is omitted from the translation on p. 177; the key adjective "cultur-↗

might make for difficult reading in Indonesia, and risks ending up as just another example of a failed attempt by a “native” to import “foreign” ideas and regulate “natives” understanding of things, with little relevance to their survival in the city.

(Jafar Suryomenggolo • CSEAS)

References

- Bishop, Ryan; Phillips, John; and Yeo, Wei-Wei, eds. 2004. *Beyond Description: Singapore Space Historicity*. London: Routledge.
- Goh, Beng-lan. 2002. *Modern Dreams: An Inquiry into Power, Cultural Production, and the Cityscape in Contemporary Urban Penang, Malaysia*. Ithaca: Cornell University.
- Heryanto, Ariel. 1998. Kapok jadi Non-Pri. *Kompas*, 12 June.
- Irazàbal, Clara. 2005. *City Making and Urban Governance in the Americas: Curitiba and Portland*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- King, Ross. 2008. *Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya: Negotiating Urban Space in Malaysia*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Milner, A. C. 1983. Islam and the Muslim State. In *Islam in Southeast Asia*, edited by M. B. Hooker, pp. 23–49. Leiden: Brill.
- Purnomo, Adi. 2005. *Relativitas*. Jakarta: Borneo Publication.
- Robison, Richard. 1986. *Indonesia: The Rise of Capital*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- Sakai, Takashi. 2009. Indonesia Torouran Iseki to Betonamu Tairu [Preliminary Study of Vietnamese Decorated Tiles found in Java, Indonesia]. *Kanazawadaigaku Koukogaku Kiyō* [Bulletin of Archeology, The University of Kanagawa] 30: 28–41.
- Tadiar, Neferti Xina. 2004. *Fantasy-Production: Sexual Economies and Other Philippine Consequences for the New World Order*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Winters, Jeffrey A. 1996. *Power in Motion: Capital Mobility and the Indonesian State*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

↙ al studies” which refers to previous studies (p. 103) is omitted from its translation on p. 72, which makes it at odds given the “Pengantar Penyunting” by Manneke Budiman, a foreword by the editor of the book, emphasizes the importance of “cultural studies” for studying the city as Kusno’s writings have illustrated; “This chapter examines the spatial effects of the 1998 riots in the area of Glodok” (p. 104) is translated as “Bab ini mengaji gedung-gedung baru di Glodok” (p. 72) which gives a completely different meaning.